

The Council of El: Canaanite Mythology in the Hebrew Bible?

The OT is strong in its rejection of Canaanite religious beliefs and practices. Baal worship, a perennial problem in pre-exilic Israel, is emphatically condemned. Although Canaanite mythology is not directly discussed, we may assume that it is was equally loathsome to faithful Israelites. It is, after all, the accompanying 'revelation' constituting Baal and other gods as the rulers of heaven and earth.

All the more surprising is the presence of elements or fragments in the Hebrew Bible that reflect Canaanite mythology. Of course, we cannot be certain that they were indeed borrowed from the Canaanites, but they look similar enough. Likely, Canaanite myths are indeed their source of origin.

What sort of elements are we talking about? In this issue, I will discuss the rider on the clouds, Mount Zaphon and the far north, and the idea of a divine council. In a following issue, I will deal with dragons and other monsters and the so-called *Chaoskampf* motif.

The Rider on the Clouds

Baal is often spoken of as the rider on the clouds. As the storm god, he appears in thunder, storm, and rain. The clouds may thus be taken as his chariot. Baal rides out to bring rain. He also rides his chariot of clouds into battle as a warrior. Some portrayals of God use similar language.

It is noteworthy that this element only appears in poetic texts. It is probably meant to make the point that YHWH, not Baal, is the true rider on the clouds and therefore the true provider of rain and fertility. Still, it is striking that such Baal-like imagery could be used to describe Israel's God:

Behold, the Lord is riding on a swift cloud and comes to Egypt (Is. 19:1 ESV)

He makes the clouds his chariot; he rides on the wings of the wind (Ps 104:3 ESV; cf. Ps. 18:9f)



[Sing praises] to him who rides in the heavens, the ancient heavens (Ps. 68:33 ESV; see also Ps. 68:4)

There is none like God, O Jeshurun, who rides through the heavens to your help (Dt. 33:26 ESV;)

In short, a characteristic of Baal is ascribed to YHWH and expresses that power and supremacy are his alone. YHWH is the true version of which Baal is merely a fake and weak imitation.

Mount Zaphon (the Far North)

Psalm 48 describes God's holy mountain and city in surprising words: "Beautiful in elevation ... the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north" (Ps. 48:1f ESV). *In the far north?* Jerusalem is roughly located in the middle of the land of Israel; there is nothing north about it.

The background (you guessed it) is Canaanite mythology. Baal, so it was believed, had built his palace on Mount Zaphon (Hebr. *zaphon* = north). This mountain, known today as Jebel Aqra, is located 30 kilometres north of Ugarit, on the border between Turkey and Syria. It is 1717 meters high. Due to its location close to the sea, it stands out prominently, visible from afar, and is known for its thunderstorms. Which confirmed the belief that Baal lived there.

The phrase also appears in words Isaiah puts into the mouth of the king of Babylon: "I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north" (Is. 14:13 ESV) – his aim is to join the gods and their council. The verse reflects the same set of beliefs about Baal's domicile.

It should be noted that the Hebrew text of Psalm 48 does not have a preposition where the ESV puts "in". Mount Zion is not located *in* the far north; it *is* the far north. To express this more fully: What is claimed for Mount Zaphon, the mountain in the far north where Baal ruled, in reality applies to Zion. This is the dwelling place of God Most High. Different from the ESV, this is how the NIV translates:

Beautiful in its loftiness,
the joy of the whole earth,
like the heights of Zaphon is Mount Zion,
the city of the Great King. (Ps. 48:2 New International Version; emphasis added)



Jebel Aqra, alias Mount Zaphon (Anthiok 2008)

This fits well with the conclusion reached by David Tsumura (2015: 15):

In various ways, therefore, it is apparent that Canaanite religion exerted influence on the religious life of the Israelites. On the other hand, those Canaanite religious practices were completely rejected by the prophetic religion, though the Biblical authors sometimes adopted Canaanite expressions and divine names for metaphorical purposes. One should carefully distinguish between literary metaphors and religious syncretism. These Canaanite expressions were used by Biblical writers either metaphorically or apologetically.

The general principle as illustrated by these two examples is: Canaanite mythology provides helpful background information to understand the OT. But it should not be the lens through which we interpret OT Scripture, as if the Israelites accepted the mythological world of faith.

The Divine Council (or Assembly)

The concept of a divine council, congregation, or assembly is a much larger and more controversial topic. I will interact with the work of Michael Heiser, best known for his book *The Unseen Realm* (2015b). Heiser has been influential in bringing the idea to the attention of a broader audience: YHWH, the God of Israel, governs the world through a council of *elohim* or gods, much like El or Baal in Canaanite mythology. In Heiser's view, a number of these gods have rebelled against God after they were set over the nations, a third rebellion in the heavenlies after that of Satan and of Genesis 6. Thus, they became the gods of the nations, worshipped regionally. Although these gods are greatly inferior to the God of Israel, they are nevertheless real.

As discussed in the previous issue, Canaanite mythology speaks of the 70 sons of El. All of these were gods as well. They were joined in the council by at least one more group of lower-level heavenly beings, the equivalent of angels or messengers. Does God have such a council as well?

Divine (and Angelic) Vocabulary

Before we look into this, we need some Hebrew vocabulary.

El is not only a name but also a word meaning *god*. Its plural is *elim*.

Elohim is a plural form but is often used as a singular, meaning *god*. Depending on the context, it may have a plural meaning. In those cases, its meaning usually is *gods*. Both *el* and *elohim* can refer to the God of Israel.

Then there are the **bene elohim** or **bene elim**, literally the *sons of god*. The first appearance of this phrase in Scripture is in Genesis 6, where they are involved in a horrid transgression. However, there are also good sons of god who remained faithful to YHWH. The term is rare; we find it in Psalm 29, 82, and 89, in Deuteronomy 32:8, and in Job 1f and 38.

One element in the controversy we are heading into is whether the sons of god are angels or whether the two categories are distinct.

The Hebrew word translated *angel*, **mal'akh**, literally means *messenger*, much like the Greek word *angelos*, from which the English word derives.

A few other terms are used. Based on Psalm 103:20f, angels are also called **mighty ones**, **ministers**, and the **host** ready to obey and execute God's will.

One more term is **holy ones**. It can be used for heavenly beings (so in Dt. 33:2; Job 5:1; 15:15; Ps. 89:5-7; Zech. 14:5; Dan. 4:13, 17, 23; in Dan.4, they are also called **watchers**). Are they angels, sons of god, or both? Psalm 89:5-7 speaks of "the assembly of holy ones" and appears to include the sons of *elim*. If angels and sons of god are distinct, it is unclear whether *holy ones* can include angels or refers only to sons of god.

But perhaps (although Heiser does not see it this way) all these terms are roughly synonymous or at least overlap. The term **host of heaven**, at least, certainly seems broad and inclusive. The common reference to God as *LORD of hosts* suggests this. Eugene Peterson (2005)

captures its meaning well in *The Message*: God of the angel armies (which also suggests angels do more than deliver messages!). More on this in Appendix 2 below.

Relic and Literary Motif, or Essential Worldview Element?

The crucial question is: Are we dealing with relics or leftovers, a remnant of Canaanite beliefs, used in various ways for literary and rhetorical purposes, much like the previous two elements? Or was this an integrated part of Israel's theology and worldview (and perhaps therefore should be for us as well)?

The latter is what Michael Heiser argues for. He even speaks of “the divine council worldview of the Bible” ([Heiser 2015a](#)) and of “a council of gods” ([Heiser 2008](#): 2). He defines this council as follows:

A term used by Hebrew Bible scholars for the heavenly host, the assembly of divine [!] beings who administer the affairs of the cosmos under Yahweh, the God of Israel. All ancient Mediterranean cultures had some conception of a divine council, including Israel. However, Israelite religion's divine council was distinct. (Heiser 2016)

So what is included in this worldview? In his own words:

Israelite religion had an assembly of heavenly host under the authority of Yahweh. This assembly has very close affinities [!] to the pantheons of ancient Near East, particularly in Canaanite religion. ([Heiser 2011](#): 2; a bold claim, considering nothing like a pantheon, an overview of the gods of a particular religion, can be constructed from the OT – how many members of the council do we know by name?)

The OT exhibits a three-tiered council ... In Israelite religion, Yahweh, at the top tier, was the supreme authority over the divine council, which included a second tier of lesser *elohim* (“gods”), also called the “sons of God” or “sons of the Most High.” The third tier comprised the *mal'akhim* (“angels”). ([Heiser 2012b](#); cf. [2001](#): 67)

There is solid evidence [!] in the Hebrew Bible for a three-tiered council. (Heiser 2016; another bold claim, considering the dearth of evidence; see appendix 2 below.)

One more crucial element is the role of council members in ruling the nations. Heiser bases this on his interpretation of Deuteronomy 32:8, where the borders of the nations are said to be established or fixed “according to the number of the sons of God”. Some translations have “the sons of Israel” here, but the ESV translates what is probably the correct and original reading (see appendix 3). In Heiser's understanding, this happened immediately following the Tower of Babel incident (Gen. 11:8). At this point, the nations were allotted to the sons of god. According to Heiser, God was giving the nations as an inheritance, not *giving them* an inheritance. Later, some of these sons of *elohim* rebelled as well and were called to account by God as recorded in Psalm 82. In Heiser's own words:

The aftermath of the Babel incident shows that Yahweh expected that council beings use their own free decision making capacity. In Deuteronomy 4:19-20 and 32:8-9, Yahweh divided and assigned the nations to lesser gods [yet another bold claim, as shown in appendix 3] ... Yahweh delegated authority – He rejected the nations as His own people and took Israel as His portion. While Yahweh is ultimately sovereign, He does not unilaterally govern the other nations. He leaves that to subordinates, who should rule according to His will. When they don't, they are judged. This is precisely the point of Psa 82, where Yahweh judges the gods of his council who are responsible for corrupt rule over the nations of the earth. (Heiser 2016).

Lastly, the “sons of God” to whom the nations were assigned after the Tower of Babel episode became corrupt at some point of their assignments. Psalm 82 is all about their judgment. These territorial entities are the basis for the supernatural “princes” associated with nations in Daniel 10, as well as the “principalities”, “rulers”, “authorities”, “thrones”, and “powers” Paul wrote about in various passages (e.g., Eph 6: 11-12). All these terms speak of geographical dominion, and so they are appropriate to describe

the situation that emerged after Babel in the biblical story. (Heiser 2018: Kindle Loc. 1782-6).

On Heiser’s reading, there is a lot going on in Deuteronomy 32:8 and Psalm 82. It explains the extraordinary importance of these passages for Heiser’s reconstruction (as reflected in his academic work, e.g., [Heiser 2001](#), [2010](#), [2011](#)). Unfortunately, these passages are not as clear as Heiser needs them to be; both are open to very different readings, as we will see.

Because this issue is long, I will discuss Deuteronomy 32:8 in an appendix. The question of polytheism and that of angels and sons of god (two classes?) will also be the subject of an appendix.

The Council in the OT

With this vocabulary in place and the crucial question in mind, let’s turn to the biblical evidence.

An interesting aside: Council terminology is used most often – by far – to speak of the congregation or assembly of Israel. This is worth contemplating. The council of God’s people on earth gets far more attention in Scripture than its heavenly counterpart. The table shows a quick count of three important nouns. Only six times they are used to speak of a heavenly assembly.

Hebrew	Occurrences	Relevant translations	Of these in heaven
<i>Sod</i>	21	council 6x	4
<i>Edah</i>	149	congregation 126x	1
<i>Qahal</i>	123	assembly 90x congregation 10x	1

Of course, a heavenly congregation can be spoken of without any of these three nouns present, but still, the ratio is striking. It suggests the Bible does not have as much to say about a heavenly council or gathering as we might like. The Bible’s focus is on God’s earthly assembly. Interestingly, we never read about 70 sons of El or *elohim* in the Hebrew Bible, but we do read of 70 members of Jacob’s household who moved to Egypt (Gen. 46:27). Their descendants get a lot of attention.

Still, the heavenly assembly exists; God is not alone in his heaven. A vast host is with him. But who are these beings and what do they do?

Job

Let’s start with the book of Job. In Job 1:6ff, “the sons of God [*bene elohim*] came to present themselves before the LORD”, amongst them a figure called the Satan or the adversary. Obviously, some kind of heavenly meeting is taking place, but we learn virtually nothing about its purpose and setup, and even less about the sons of god. No details are given. The same is true for Job 2:1-6. The sons of god are mentioned once more in Job 38:7. They were present at creation, shouting for joy.

There are a few more references in Job that touch on our subject (Job 4:8; 5:1; 15:8; 15:15), but again without giving us any kind of detail.

Genesis

In the creation account of Genesis 1, we find no involvement of a heavenly council (or anybody else, for that matter), with one possible exception in Genesis 1:26. God is the sole agent in creation. Genesis 1 is a polemical text. As an antithesis attacking the creational and foundational myths of the Ancient Near East, it displays a strong tendency to demythologize the creation event:

- There is no battle with an opposing force or monster representing chaos or non-order.
- The deep in Genesis 1:2 is simply formless, dark, empty water. Different from ancient myths, it is neither evil nor in any way alive.

- The sun, moon, and stars are only lights and indicators of time instead of divine beings.
- There is mention of a sea monster in Genesis 1:21 (“the great sea creatures”; compare the parallel in Ps. 104:26, which speaks of “Leviathan”). But it is not a threat to God; as in Psalm 104 and Job 41, it is simply one more creature he has made.

So if there is anybody else present, if there is a divine council in Genesis 1, it is hiding in three short words: “Let *us* make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness” (Gen. 1:26; emphasis added).

The plural form, it must be admitted, is striking. But what does it mean?

Something similar appears three more times in Scripture. In Genesis 3:22, God says: “Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil”. In Genesis 11:7, he says: „Come, let us go down and there confuse their language”. And in Isaiah 6:8: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” In Isaiah 6, at least we know that God is accompanied by two or more seraphim. But in Genesis, he appears to be alone. Or not?

It is unlikely that this is an early hint at the Trinity: the one God as a plurality of persons, as if Father, Son, and Holy Spirit here engaged in a conversation between them. *Pluralis majestatis*, the royal *we*, is unknown in Hebrew. Is this, then, a subtle hint that God was not alone after all, a vestige of the divine council so prominently involved in pagan creation myths?

If so, then it is hardly a confirmation of the importance of such a council and even less of its role. The council has all but disappeared and plays no active role whatsoever. Except for the plural pronouns, it remains completely invisible.

One wonders if it makes sense to edit out the entire divine council – except for this one ‘leftover’, a final, oblique reference to something not made explicit in the wider context of Genesis (except, arguably, for Genesis 6 – another rather oblique passage).

Perhaps, therefore, something else is going on in the mind of the author. Maybe he attempts to express a complex and profound idea. Somehow, God is one, yet he is not a singularity. He is one, but he is at the same time greater than one, transcending the concept of oneness. There were no better ways to express it – yet.

But it may also be that the plural pronouns hint at the presence of heavenly beings. Job 38:7 certainly shows they existed at the time and witnessed what God did. But even so, these passages give us no details.

1 Kings 22

Finally, we come to a more detailed description of a heavenly council meeting, but there is a problem. As part of Micaiah’s reply to king Ahab, the prophet describes a vision:

Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left; and the LORD said, “Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?” And one said one thing, and another said another. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, saying, “I will entice him.” And the LORD said to him, “By what means?” And he said, “I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.” And he said, “You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do so.” Now therefore behold, the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; the LORD has declared disaster for you. (1 Ki. 22:19-23)

Heiser (2016) takes the story, which functions as a rhetorical device, not necessarily an actual description of heaven, at face value: this is discussion and deliberation taking place in God’s council meeting.

We have indeed a close parallel to the Canaanite concept, but it is used in prophetic speech – to make a point, not to teach how heaven operates and reaches decisions. Or are we really to think that lying spirits are members of God’s court and have his ear? Micaiah tells a biting story, in some ways similar to a parable. We should not expect it to be factually and historically accurate in every way.

Daniel

The book of Daniel includes several appearances of heavenly beings, in part using its own terminology. It even gives us two names: Gabriel and Michael. We find Daniel's most extensive description of heaven in Chapter 7.

In Daniel 7:9f, "the Ancient of Days" is described in terms reminiscent of El in Canaanite mythology. He sits down in the presence of a huge heavenly multitude. This is the heavenly court in session. "The court sat in judgment", we are told – but who exactly, and what did they do? And what about the many millions of others present? Again, we learn tantalizingly little about the heavenly host.

Psalm 29:1

Psalm 29 uses language that would have reminded the ancient Israelites of Baal, the god of thunder. Again, the point is to show that YHWH, not Baal, is the true God of power. Verse 1 calls on "heavenly beings", literally *bene elim*, sons of gods, to praise God.

Since the psalm ends with an affirmation of God's enthronement as king forever (Ps. 29:10), the scene appears to be set in heaven, where the sons of *elim* are called to worship him. That's it.

Psalm 89:5-7

Psalm 89:5-7 more explicitly speaks of a heavenly meeting or assembly, using two of the relevant Hebrew nouns:

Let the heavens praise your wonders, O LORD,
your faithfulness in the assembly [Hebr. *qahal*] of the holy ones!
For who in the skies can be compared to the LORD?
Who among the heavenly beings [Hebr. *bene elim*, sons of gods] is like the LORD,
God greatly to be feared in the council [Hebr. *sod*] of the holy ones,
and awesome above all who are around him? (Ps. 89:5-7 ESV)

It appears sons of *elim* are present, but it is not clear whether "the holy ones" includes others besides them or whether the two phrases are synonyms. As to what they do, the only activity spoken of is, once again, praise.

Psalm 82

Finally, we come to Psalm 82, perhaps the most crucial building block for Heiser's thesis, and therefore deserving of a longer discussion. A council meeting of El (so literally: an *edah* of El) is taking place, "in the midst of the gods" (Hebr. *elohim*; Ps. 82:1). God reproaches them for their injustice (Ps. 82:2-4) and pronounces judgment:

I said, "You are gods [Hebr. *elohim*],
sons of the Most High, all of you;
nevertheless, like men you shall die,
and fall like any prince." (Ps. 82:6f ESV; strictly speaking, "sons of the Most High" differs from "sons of God", but is obviously close in meaning)

We face a double shocker. Are there other gods besides YHWH? And have the members of his council transgressed and made themselves guilty?

This is precisely how Heiser sees it. Traditionally, Psalm 82 has been understood as being about judges of Israel, called gods because they represent God, or perhaps rulers, or the people of Israel as a whole; after all, Deuteronomy 14:1 calls Israel "the sons of the LORD your God". In that case, the council meeting would take place on earth. But Heiser rejects this reading. He insists on reading the psalm in the light of Psalm 89:5-7. Heiser argues the assembly meets in heaven and consequently, the *elohim* are heavenly beings (gods), not humans.

The אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) of Yahweh's council in Psa 82 are divine beings, not human rulers. This is obvious from the parallel passage in Psa 89:5–8. In Psalm 82:6, the plural אֱלֹהִים

(*elohim*) are called “sons of the Most High.” These אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) are not human since Psa 89:6 (Psa 89:7 in Hebrew) locates their assembly or council in the clouds or heavens (קַדְשֵׁי שָׁמַיִם, *vashshachaq*) not on earth. (Heiser 2016)

Heiser connects Psalm 82 with Deuteronomy 32:8 (as he interprets it). Notice that this is a big step. There is little if anything in the text of Psalm 82 to suggest this; it does not obviously connect to Deuteronomy 32:8. Heiser claims that *elohim* and sons of *elohim/elim* were appointed the rulers or governors over nations. As such, they disobeyed and became the gods of these nations:

The disinheritation of the nations and their subjugation under the sons of God in Deut 4:19-20; 32:8.9 portray a sovereign act of Yahweh, whereby he rejects direct rule of rebellious humanity. The sons of God are not portrayed as presumptively [sic; I suspect he means *presumptuously*] moving into this vacuum. They were put over the nations by Yahweh, and then subsequently judged in Psalm 82 for their corrupt administration. (Heiser 2008: 26)

So far Heiser; here is my critique.

1. Even if Psalm 89:5-7 is set in heaven, this does not prove that Psalm 82 must be as well. This would need to be proven from Psalm 82 itself: which of YHWH's congregations is in view? It might be Israel. Or not. But Psalm 89 does not tell us.

2. Heiser believes the divine council is populated with gods. In the relevant Ugaritic texts, it is not uncommon to speak of *gods* and *sons of god* interchangeably (Heiser 2001: 67), but this is not the case in Hebrew. The Hebrew text is more cautious. It steers away from 'god' language when speaking of God's council. Only in Psalm 82 is the phrase “sons of ...” used together with the word *elohim*; only in Psalm 82 do *elohim* explicitly appear in God's council meeting.

Nowhere else are the *sons of god* identified as *gods*. Surely this is significant. It suggests the writers were wrestling with the limits of the vocabulary available to them, as we do. This may be their way to express that these beings are close to God/gods but still less than gods. The word *elohim* is freely used in Scripture for gods who are worshipped on earth but not for members of God's heavenly assembly.

Because of this, if Psalm 82 is interpreted differently, Heiser's thesis that the sons of god are themselves gods and that God's council meeting includes them, suffers for lack of evidence.

3. The Psalm is stranger than Heiser admits. Two clusters of things are brought together that make for an unusual combination, an apparent misfit. This is true regardless of whether you believe Psalm 82 speaks of judges of Israel, Israel at large, or a class of (semi-)divine heavenly beings.

First, it announces that “like men, you shall die” (Ps. 82:7). How do gods die? Heiser counters that men cannot die “like men”. This fails to convince. We may paraphrase: like [other] men, you shall [also or likewise] die.

Second, the text speaks of judging justly and of rescuing the weak and needy (Ps. 82:2-4). How do gods do this? Heiser (2010: 14) claims: “Nowhere in Psalm 82 do we have any hint of the Mosaic Law, Sinai, a Jewish nation, or the canonical revelation given to the Jews.” This is an astonishing claim, seeing that doing justice and protecting the poor and orphans is a central concern of the Law; the entire indictment in Psalm 82 is based on it.

4. The link with Deuteronomy 32:8 (more on this verse in Appendix 3) is too speculative to give it any real weight in our interpretation of Psalm 82.

5. There are other options to understand Psalm 82. Asaph may be indicting the gods of the nations, using the framework of a divine council meeting known from Canaan but without intending this as an informative statement on God's operations in heaven. It may be a literary device, not a factual description, used to offer a prophetic rebuke of idolatry (and its gods) for

its poor record in promoting justice and compassion. It is, after all, a *prophetic* psalm, so we may expect it to do strange and unconventional things.

Psalm 82 in John 10

There is one more complication with interpreting Psalm 82: It is quoted by Jesus in John 10:34. Jesus has just said of himself that “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). On this, the Jews want to stone him, because he has made himself God. Jesus defends himself thus:

Is it not written in your Law, “I said, you are gods”? If he called them gods to whom the word of God came – and Scripture cannot be broken – do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, “You are blaspheming,” because I said, “I am the Son of God”? (John 10:34-36 ESV)

By introducing the quotation like this, Jesus probably implies that “you” in “you are gods” includes the audience.

Heiser (2010: 14) argues that this makes a weak, “me too” argument; Jesus would merely say: If the word *god* can be applied to Israel, I can use it for myself, too. However, the argument is not “me too” but “how much more”. Regardless of whether the original statement was made to humans or to heavenly beings, the argument works: If it is (or was) true for them, *how much more* does it apply to the one sent by the Father.

The rabbis understood Psalm 82 to speak of Israel. It is to them that “the word of God came” – at Sinai:

The relation of the passage to Israel’s judges is also unlikely; in John 10:35 the recipients of the saying, “I said, You are gods” are said to be, “those to whom the word of God came (ἐγένετο)”; this is best understood as describing Israel’s gathered tribes about Mount Sinai, as virtually all the Rabbis believed. In this connection we should recall the importance to the Jews of Exod 4:21–22, “Israel is my first-born son.... Let my son go that he may serve me.” (Beasley-Murray 1999: 176f)

It is unlikely that the audience of Jesus (and, arguably, Jesus himself, although one could reason that he is merely accommodating his response to their understanding) would have understood this differently.

NT: Greater Clarity

The subtitle of *The Unseen Realm* states Heiser’s aim: to restore “the supernatural worldview of the Bible”. Much of the Western world certainly errs on the side of recognizing this side of reality too little. I agree with Heiser that the unseen realm is real and important.

Where I disagree with Heiser, however, is (a) his unequivocal language of gods as members of the divine council (on this, see appendix 1); (b) the implication of a direct correspondence between gods worshipped on earth and (the sons of) gods in heaven; (c) the third rebellion, after that of Satan and that of the sons of god in Genesis 6.

There can be no one-to-one correspondence between the gods worshipped by humans and sons of god or other heavenly beings. The world of ‘gods-on-earth’ is flexible and changing; new gods arise, old ones are forgotten. The number and constitution of heavenly beings, on the other hand, is not. By the way, if the gods on earth are (sons of) *elohim* after all, what about the fact that roughly half of these deities are female? Female sons of god?

Heiser’s case leans heavily on Psalm 82, Deuteronomy 32:8, and a chain of interpretations and inferences around these verses. It builds too much on two notoriously difficult and controversial passages. If any link in the chain fails, Heiser’s construct of a council of gods through whom God rules the world, of what he calls “the divine council worldview of the Bible” (Heiser 2015a), is in trouble.

In addition, the NT seems to have moved on beyond the remnants of Canaanite mythology. No gods and no sons of god populate heaven or God’s throne room. The only sons of God remaining are believers (humans!). In descriptions of God’s heavenly courtroom or host, we

read only of angels (plus four cherubim and 24 elders, in case they are not to be counted as angels; Rev. 4). When war breaks out in heaven, Michael and his *angels* fight against the dragon and *his* angels (Rev. 12:7).

To speak of gods inhabiting the heavenly realm is not helpful and potentially misleading. There are indeed 'gods' worshipped on earth. But they are no longer spoken of as in any sense truly divine or even real. What is real are demonic powers behind the facade:

Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "an idol has no real existence," and that "there is no God but one." For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth – as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords" – yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1 Cor. 8:4-6 ESV; Paul's paradox: there *are* and there *are not* many gods, depending on what is meant; the solution – these 'gods' are actually something else – follows:)

What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. (1 Cor. 10:19f ESV; cf. Dt. 32:17)

Many Israelites in OT times may well have believed that the gods of their neighbours were real. They also held that the stars as the host of heaven were "animate beings" ([Heiser 2008: 24](#)), a universal belief in the Ancient Near East. That does not mean that we should, too. This was part of their world. It is not a part we need to preserve. I believe that both stars and angels exist, but not that each star is the representation or manifestation of a particular angel. The stars are not sentient spiritual beings. In God's courtroom, there are no other gods. And in fact, there are no other gods – not really, not truly.

Even in the OT, there are occasions when this truth finds expression:

Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? (Jer. 2:11a ESV)

For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the LORD made the heavens. (Ps. 96:5 ESV; cf. 1 Chr. 16:26; Dt. 4:39)

Relic and Literary Motif, or Essential Worldview Element?

Coming to the end of another long discourse (even if with three appendices still to come), I return to my question: Is the divine council another example of the literary use of Canaanite mythology, much like the rider on the clouds or Mount Zaphon, the far north?

Sometimes, it is. Micaiah makes brilliant use of the Canaanite council concept when confronting king Ahab (1 Ki. 22:19-23).

There is a significant difference, however, with the first two elements we looked at. The concept of the divine council is far too entrenched and used far too extensively to be a mere relic used for literary purposes. The council concept is preserved and developed; most significantly, it carries over into the NT. Its development includes:

- Its members are not gods, equals or near equals of its king, but rather heavenly beings.
- The number of the heavenly host is huge, counted in the hundreds of millions. I am not aware of a parallel to this in Canaanite mythology.
- YHWH rules supreme in this congregation, without strife or competition, with few exceptions (Job 1f; on Heiser's reading, Psalm 82). The heavenly host is there to serve him. In fact, most often we find them engaged in worship.

The latter, no doubt, is the most important development. In Scripture, the heavenly congregation becomes a place of worship, not of debate.

Appendix 1: Polytheism? And: What Language Can We Use to Speak of Gods?

Does Heiser slide into polytheism, seeing there are many gods on his council? I don't think so. My preferred language to speak of this is different, but Heiser offers careful and substantial

explanation to make clear what he means. YHWH is unique, “in a class by himself”, unlike any other; only he is uncreated, and himself the creator of all the other *elohim* (Heiser 2008: 29f).

To a large extent, this is a matter of semantics, that is, the meaning of words; it all depends on how we define them. And in speaking about the divine, we run into the limits of words. We face a similar problem in English: The word *god* means something different, depending on whether we use it for YHWH or for ‘other’ gods – who *are* and *are not* gods, depending on what is meant. At least in English, we have a handy solution: We tend to capitalize the word when we want to speak of the one true God and so distinguish him from any other god.

I do believe Heiser is inconsistent in his translation of *elohim* by speaking of *gods* when dealing with *elohim* in heaven. He rightly points out that the Hebrew word *elohim* has a broader and different range of meaning than our word *god*. He argues the Hebrew word does not suggest a set of attributes, like the word *god* does, but rather a sphere or domain: it refers to non-corporeal beings in the invisible world:

All the things called אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) in the Hebrew Bible have one thing in common: they all inhabit the non-human realm. That is, they are by nature not part of the world of humankind, a world of ordinary embodiment. אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) as a term describes residence—it identifies the proper domain of the entity described by it. Yahweh, the lesser gods, angels, demons, and the disembodied dead are all rightful inhabitants of the spiritual world. (Heiser 2016)

But if that is so, *gods* is not a good translation for the (sons of) *elohim* in heaven, because they do not share the attributes of God (or gods). Instead, *heavenly beings* would be a near-perfect translation since this is a term of domain rather than of attributes.

At the same time, to translate *gods* does make sense when speaking of the gods (*elohim*) of the nations, gods on earth. In this case, it is a matter of attributes after all: These gods are worshipped, even if inappropriately, which is a divine prerogative. In the eyes of their worshippers, they are indeed gods.

One more point: It is worth thinking hard about the language we choose because our words may lead others where we do not want them to go. I will close this section with an example of this. I hasten to add that the following quotations have nothing to do with Heiser; they come from a source that predates all his writings. I add these quotes because I am convinced that this is what we must avoid.

This is not to suggest, however, that the Israelites denied the existence of angelic or spiritual beings. In fact, they often referred to these beings as “gods.” What is more, while many today understand angels to be rather innocuous creatures, mere extensions of God’s will, lacking a mind and volition of their own, the Old Testament authors everywhere assume that these gods have a good deal of autonomous power. (Boyd 1997: 115)

As we shall see below and throughout the following chapters, much of the biblical tradition as well as church history has assumed that everything in creation is directly or indirectly under the authority of some angel. The soil, wind, rain, sun, animals, vegetation and so on each has its own guardian angel. (Ibid.: 128; an incredible statement; the only evidence given, in a footnote, is that the author read it somewhere being ascribed to Augustine)

WE HAVE THUS FAR SEEN THAT, ALONGSIDE ITS UNDERSTANDING that the world is surrounded by hostile cosmic forces, the Old Testament assumes the presence of an invisible society of created gods existing beneath Yahweh and above humankind. This divine society is construed as being like human society in many respects. These spiritual beings, like human beings, clearly have a mind and a will of their own. They can choose to work for God or against him. They are, like human beings, morally responsible. (Ibid.: 143)

With these quotations (again, NOT Heiser!), we are not far from the polytheism of Egypt, Babylon, Canaan, Greece, and Rome.

Appendix 2: Sons of God and Angels: Two Classes?

In the section on Hebrew vocabulary for angels and gods, I pointed out there is disagreement about the nature and status of the sons of god and angels: Are they distinct and if so, are they two classes or levels of heavenly beings?

According to Heiser (2016), “there is solid evidence in the Hebrew Bible” for this. One argument is that sons of *elohim/elim* are never called angels ([Heiser 2001](#): 67; Heiser 2018: Kindle Loc. 1778-81).

However, if we leave out *angel of the LORD*, both terms are rare in the OT. This makes it unsurprising the sons of god are not identified as angels. Unfortunately, they never appear in the same passage. It is therefore unclear whether the two terms are distinct or identical in meaning, or whether they perhaps overlap. We simply do not have enough material to go by.

There is only one exception. In Daniel 3:25, Nebuchadnezzar describes the fourth person in the fire as one who resembles “a son of the gods”. In Daniel 3:28, he refers to the same appearance as an angel of God. To Nebuchadnezzar, then, the sons of god were angels – but can we take his word for it?

The lowest, third level of the council supposedly consists of angels. Yet, Michael, himself an (arch-)angel, leads the angels into battle against Satan and his angels (Rev. 12:7). In Revelation 20:1-3, an angel seizes the devil and locks him up for a thousand years. This does not suggest a low rank for angels.

Appendix 3: Deuteronomy 32:8 and Its Interpretation According to Heiser

I have placed a discussion of Deuteronomy 32:8 in this appendix because it does not directly speak of the heavenly council. However, it is of great importance to Heiser’s scheme:

Deuteronomy 32:8 describes Yahweh’s dispersal of the nations at Babel and his resultant *disinheriting* of those nations, giving them over to other, lesser gods (*elohim*). ([Heiser 2012a](#))

The disinheritance of the nations and their subjugation under the sons of God in Deut 4:19-20; 32:8-9 portray a sovereign act of Yahweh, whereby he rejects direct rule of rebellious humanity. The sons of God are not portrayed as presumptively moving into this vacuum. They were put over the nations by Yahweh, and then subsequently judged in Psalm 82 for their corrupt administration. ([Heiser 2008](#): 26)

In Deuteronomy 4:19-20 and 32:8-9, Yahweh divided and assigned the nations to lesser gods ... He rejected the nations as His own people and took Israel as His portion. (Heiser 2016)

Lastly, the “sons of God” to whom the nations were assigned after the Tower of Babel episode became corrupt at some point of their assignments. Psalm 82 is all about their judgment. (Heiser 2018: Kindle Loc. 1782-1786)

At least at first glance, this claims considerably more than Deuteronomy 32:8 says. There is no obvious link between the verse and Psalm 82. The link to Genesis 10 or 11 has more going for it, although these chapters are about language and nationhood, not territory or borders. At no point do sons of god or other heavenly beings appear in the narrative (except if we believe they are ‘hiding’ behind the “us” of Gen. 11:7). And even in Deuteronomy, it is not clear that God appointed sons of god as rulers over the nations. Judge for yourself:

When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance,
when he divided mankind,
he fixed the borders of the peoples
according to the number of the sons of God.
But the LORD’s portion is his people,

Jacob his allotted heritage. (Dt. 32:8f ESV)

First, I should point out that there is a textual problem here. The so-called Masoretic text, on the whole the most reliable Hebrew text, reads “according to the number of the sons of Israel”. However, a few manuscripts found at Qumran (among the Dead Sea Scrolls) and several ancient translations (including the Septuagint) read either “sons of God” or “angels”.

There is no good reason why someone would have changed “Israel” to “sons of God”. It is easier to imagine a scribe changing “god” to “Israel” to avoid any suggestion of polytheism. Today’s consensus, therefore, is that in all likelihood, the Dead Sea reading is correct.

But what does it mean that God set borders “according to the number of the sons of God”? It may mean no more than that there is correspondence, perhaps in numbers. This is particularly true if the original reading would be “according to the number of the sons of Israel” after all. At the end of Genesis, 70 members of Jacob’s house are said to have come to Egypt (Gen. 46:27). Genesis 10 lists 70 nations. The numbers agree.

Even if the alternative reading, “the number of the sons of God”, is correct, which is probable (but not certain), this suggests what may be meant: There is correspondence in numbers (cf. Joshua 4:5, where a similar phrase is used for 12 stones that are to be taken from the Jordan, “according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Israel”). There is no indication that more is implied, such as that these beings are appointed to rule the nations or that the nations are ‘given up’ to them to worship them as their gods. For this, more is needed; there are two ways to get there.

First, Deuteronomy 32 uses several related words: *inherit*, *allot*, and *portion*. The question is, who inherits what, or who is allotted to whom? As the verse stands (in the ESV), the nations receive an inheritance, presumably a territory (cf. Acts 17:26), and God takes Israel as his portion. However, it is possible to translate the verse in such a way that the nations are not the ones receiving the inheritance. They become the direct object and are themselves the inheritance – but only if we make a small change to the verb. In that case, God is giving the nations as an inheritance: “He allotted the nations to the sons of God” (Heiser 2016). This reading would lead to a stronger parallel between the two verses: God receives (or takes) Israel as his portion; others (presumably the sons of god) are given the nations. As evidence, this is a bit thin; more support is needed.

Second, Heiser therefore brings in Deuteronomy 4:19f. He is, in a sense, reading Deuteronomy 32:8 in the light of this earlier verse.

And beware lest you raise your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them, things that the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven. But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own inheritance, as you are this day. (Dt. 4:19f ESV)

It is strange Heiser leans so strongly on this passage (e.g., [Heiser 2008](#): 20; 2016), seeing it does not say what Heiser makes it say. The gods are allotted to the nations (whatever that means), not the other way around. Nothing here suggests these gods were initially divine or heavenly rulers set in place by God, the one who allotted these nations to them – rulers who only later corrupted their ways and rebelled. Heiser also points to Deuteronomy 29:24-26, but these verses suffer from the same problem: the direction of allotment is not to the gods but – in this case – to Israel.

In addition, Deuteronomy 4:19 probably means something different altogether. Sun, moon, and stars are “allotted to all the peoples”; “all the peoples” includes Israel. The point is: Creation (specifically, the sun, moon, and stars) is for all, a benefit bestowed – not something to be worshipped.

All in all, the reconstruction summarized at the beginning of this section turns out to rest on a difficult Bible verse and a chain of uncertainties.

Attribution

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